

Archived version from NCDOCKS Institutional Repository <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/>



Russell Eugene Tranbarger: Renaissance Nurse

By: **Phoebe Pollitt**

Abstract

"If you are going to get involved—get involved. Don't sit on the sidelines," says Dr. Russell Eugene Tranbarger. Without question, he has followed his own advice. Educator, clinician, historian, legislative advocate, leader, author, editor, role model, trailblazer, nurse: Tranbarger has worn all of these hats, and more. He started by breaking barriers in nursing and has continued doing so throughout his career, all while making valuable contributions to the profession. As an administrator, Tranbarger has served as president and vice president of several organizations. In the classroom, his endeavors have helped eradicate the stereotype of nursing as an exclusively female profession.

Pollitt, P.A. (2013). "Russell Eugene Tranbarger: Renaissance Nurse," *Minority Nurse*, March 30, 2013 (Men in Nursing Magazine). Publisher version of record available at: <https://minoritynurse.com/russell-eugene-tranbarger-renaissance-nurse/>

Russell Eugene Tranbarger: Renaissance Nurse

By Phoebe Pollitt

“If you are going to get involved—get involved. Don’t sit on the sidelines,” says Dr. Russell Eugene Tranbarger. Without question, he has followed his own advice. Educator, clinician, historian, legislative advocate, leader, author, editor, role model, trailblazer, nurse: Tranbarger has worn all of these hats, and more. He started by breaking barriers in nursing and has continued doing so throughout his career, all while making valuable contributions to the profession. As an administrator, Tranbarger has served as president and vice president of several organizations. In the classroom, his endeavors have helped eradicate the stereotype of nursing as an exclusively female profession.

Building on the Florence Nightingale model of nursing education and reflecting the social mores of the day, the first schools of nursing and professional nursing organizations in much of the nation not only discriminated against women of color, but also excluded men. In fact, the American Nurses Association did not allow men to be members for the first 40 years of its existence. For years, many people struggled to create a space for male nurses in educational institutions, workplace settings, and professional organizations. Tranbarger was an early and tireless advocate for this marginalized group.

Tranbarger actually first studied nursing hoping he could earn enough money to pay for medical school; he wanted to become a doctor but quickly found that his true calling was nursing, a field that used all of his knowledge, skill, intellect, and interpersonal skills. Although the hours were long and the work difficult, the rewards of watching his patients improve because of his care was astounding, he says. From the beginning of his career, even as a student nurse, Tranbarger challenged the role of men in nursing. In 1958, he was elected president of the Student Nurse Association of Illinois, the first man to hold that office. After graduating from the all-male Alexian Brothers School of Nursing in Chicago in 1959, Tranbarger, to the dismay of many of the nursing staff, became the first male nurse at Children’s Memorial Hospital in Chicago. He was then commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Army Nurse Corps. After receiving his Bachelor of Science in Nursing from DePaul University, also in Chicago, he taught operating room nursing to students, many of whom were then sent to serve in the Vietnam War. He served from January 1960, until November 1967. His assignments included Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Colorado, Letterman Army Hospital in California, and Brooke Army Medical Center in Texas.

Tranbarger left Illinois for North Carolina to earn his Master of Science in Nursing Administration from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. After graduating in 1970, he became the Associate Director of Nursing at North Carolina Memorial Hospital and was appointed as an adjunct faculty member at the

UNC School of Nursing, becoming the first man on the school's faculty. After earning his doctorate from North Carolina State University in 1991, Tranbarger joined the faculty at East Carolina University. Throughout his career, Tranbarger has been a leader in state and national nursing associations, holding a variety of offices in organizations such as the American Nurses Association, the North Carolina Foundation for Nursing, the North Carolina Federation of Nursing Organizations, and the American Academy of Nursing. He is the first man to serve as president of the North Carolina Nurses Association and the first man to chair the North Carolina Board of Nursing. While Tranbarger's leadership and contributions to nursing, especially nursing administration, have been recognized with numerous state and national awards, he may be best known for his pioneering work on behalf of men in nursing.

In 1990, Tranbarger presented a paper at the American Assembly for Men in Nursing (AAMN) conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Prior to that meeting he had sought to reduce the emphasis on gender in the nursing profession, but after attending the conference he realized gender-specific support and assistance were required to recruit and retain men in nursing. Tranbarger says he drew upon his childhood experiences to deal with the marginalization of men in his work. Growing up without a father and being the only person in a small town with his last name "prepared [him] to be an outsider in nursing, because that is what a man in nursing is and certainly was 50 years ago! Lots of men and minorities in nursing try to blend in, not to stand out."

Following that meeting, Tranbarger became an active member of the AAMN. In addition to serving as a role model for many young men in or considering a nursing career, he appeared in many media outlets speaking on behalf of male nurses. Tranbarger played crucial roles in the AAMN, holding every major office in the organization, including serving as its president for two terms. In addition, Tranbarger edited the AAMN journal *Interaction* for six years. He has also written extensively on topics related to men in nursing and has worked on multimedia recruitment campaigns to increase the number of men in the profession. In 2007, he coauthored *Men in Nursing*, the first book to focus on the history, challenges, and opportunities for male nurses. Finally, in the summer of 2008, the ANA honored him with the first Luther Christman Award, which recognizes the contributions that an individual man has made to the profession of nursing.

Yet, Tranbarger claims his proudest accomplishments are changes he implemented as Vice President of Nursing at Moses H. Cone Memorial Hospital in Greensboro, North Carolina, and his work on the North Carolina Nurse Practice Act of 1981 while he was Chair of the North Carolina Board of Nursing. "I never got anything because I was a man, but because of my skills, knowledge, and abilities," he says. "The 'first man this' and 'the first man that' angle does not capture the story. When I was elected president of the North Carolina Nurses Association, I think it was despite the fact that I am a man. It was because of my ability and willingness to do the work, my willingness to say what needed to be said when others wouldn't."

Tranbarger's contributions to the profession embody his words. Elected Vice President of Nursing at Moses Cone in 1977, he remembers the quality of nursing care and staff morale was very low. In fact, he claims it was common knowledge that Moses Cone was one of the worst hospitals in the country. But Tranbarger saw a great opportunity: no one expected him to succeed, and he felt few constraints in trying out new ideas. Under his leadership, patient care and nursing were the center of attention, driving decision making throughout the hospital. During his 12-year tenure at Moses Cone, Tranbarger achieved a number of firsts: he created an orientation program for newly hired nurses, began a program for nurses recovering from drug and alcohol abuse, implemented a one-year internship for new graduates, established a clinical ladder for the nursing staff, and hired a doctorally prepared nurse to manage the new nursing research office.

In another first, in the late 1970s Tranbarger partnered with Dr. Eloise Lewis, the Dean of the School of Nursing at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, to create a post-master's residency program for nurse administrators. New nurse administrators earned a full salary and worked on a variety of projects with different department heads for a year while mentored by Tranbarger. The internship program continues to this day, 30 years after its inception. Tranbarger and Lewis also worked out a system of joint appointments between the hospital and the University; University nursing faculty had clinical appointments in the hospital to keep abreast of the most current clinical practices, and select Moses Cone Hospital nurses served as part time clinical and occasional classroom teachers for nursing students at the school.

Tranbarger also initiated a program to recognize nursing excellence at Moses Cone. At the annual ceremonies, the first of which took place in 1982, national nursing leaders address the nursing staff and outstanding nurses are honored. While this practice and many others that Tranbarger spearheaded may seem commonplace today, they were unheard of 30 years ago. Leading the nursing staff at Moses Cone was Tranbarger's shining moment, he says. "My knowledge, skills, courage, and ability were tested and I succeeded. One of my goals in life was to make a difference, and Moses Cone was where I made a difference."

Tranbarger's first week as Vice President of Nursing at Moses Cone was also his first week as President of the North Carolina Nurses Association, and he served in both positions concurrently for two years. The North Carolina Nurse Practice Act of 1965 was still in effect when Tranbarger became NCNA President, and many nurses regarded the law as seriously flawed. It ordered the composition of the North Carolina Board of Nursing to include five registered nurses, three licensed practical nurses, two hospital administrators, and two physicians, all appointed by the governor. There were no term limits for the appointees. The physician and hospital administrators on the board often served a decade or more. The act did not specify whether the registered nurses had to have practiced nursing—they just needed to have a current nursing license. Under these circumstances, advances in nursing practice and education that other states were experiencing were held back in North Carolina. For example, the title "Registered Nurse" was reserved for those who had passed the Board Examination; however, a nurse failing the exam could be hired indefinitely as a "Graduate Nurse" and practice nursing for years or even

decades. Board of Nursing meetings were closed to the public and profession; only those invited by the board could attend. Before the state passed Sunshine Laws affecting every state agency, members of the board decided which items discussed at their meetings—if any—would be made public. In addition, a review made by the Sunset Legislation disclosed that the Board of Nursing had no written evidence that it ever held a disciplinary hearing for any violation of the Nurse Practice Act since the board's founding in 1903.

Along with North Carolina Nurses Association members Ernestine Small, the first African American President, and Frankie Miller, the Executive Director, Tranbarger and a panel of experts wrote a new Nurse Practice Act. He convened a meeting of all the heads of North Carolina specialty nursing organizations and urged their support for the new act, to create "one voice from all nursing organizations" in favor of enacting the proposed legislation. The new act included provisions for nine registered nurses and three licensed practical nurses, all to be elected by nurses holding North Carolina licenses. Each elected member would be restricted to two consecutive three-year terms. It would become the first elected Board of Nursing in the country, joined by two members appointed by the governor to represent the public. No longer would physicians or hospital administrators govern the practice of nursing in North Carolina. The act also allowed graduate nurses to take the Board Examination three times, and if the applicant failed, they could not practice nursing until they had educational remediation and passed the Board Examination. The proposed act was passed by the legislature and still serves nurses in North Carolina today. Tranbarger continues to work with numerous professional nursing organizations, advocating for nurses and consumers of health care. His goal of making a difference in the field has been met many times over in many different venues, and nursing is a richer profession for his service. "It is long overdue for nursing to seek qualified applicants regardless of gender, ethnicity, country of origin, or any other characteristic other than the qualities needed to be an intelligent, caring, and skilled professional nurse," Tranbarger said, reflecting on his career. "I hope I have moved us closer to that point."